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AUTHOR Brecht, Richard D.; Rivers, William P.
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ABSTRACT

Language is important in the public life of the United States because of four factors: globalization; the global diffusion of democracy and self-determination; the wave of immigration to the United States from all corners of the world; and the unique role America plays as the sole military and economic superpower. These conditions make it necessary for the United States to maintain a constant capacity in a broad range of languages, as there is no way to know exactly when world events will generate a sudden demand for particular languages. This U.S. role means that more than 65 federal agencies and departments need foreign language speakers to fulfill their mandates; 40,000 American troops will remain stationed in more than 110 nations; and successful exporters need foreign language expertise in order to understand and penetrate foreign markets, an increasingly important segment of the U.S. economy. It is, therefore, important to consider these facts and to ask the right questions about U.S. foreign language requirements, such as the demands, needs, skills, costs, benefits, options, and implications. (KFT)

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Richard D. Brecht, Director, NFLC, and William P. Rivers, Research Associate, NFLC

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Richard D. Brecht, Director, NFLC, and William P. Rivers, Research Associate, NFLC

"Language is critical to the United States carrying out its interests abroad." In general, while few would challenge this assertion by former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger[1], the specification of language needs for the breadth of American national security interests in the political, economic and social domains has proven to be a daunting task, often clouded by contradictory claims. On the one hand, it is an abiding misconception shared by most Americans at every level of education that English is a *lingua franca* suitable for all countries, all occasions and all tasks. On the other hand, alarming assertions that this country faces a crisis in its supply of competence in foreign languages remain largely unsupported and, inevitably, are viewed as self-interested when presented by representatives of the language community.

With this issue of *National Foreign Language Center Policy Issues*, we hope to revive the Center's tradition of discussing language—foreign, second, heritage, English—within the broad policy discourse of the nation. *NFLC Policy Issues* is intended to serve as a vehicle for the dissemination of pertinent policy research and policy recommendations by the NFLC, and as a platform for policy makers and leaders in the government, public, and private sectors. Moreover, we hope to bring a new set of questions, a new way of thinking about language, to the policy discourse.

Why Language Matters Now

Language matters in the public life of the US because of four factors: globalization (the free movement worldwide of people, information, and resources, enabled by technological advances); the global diffusion of democracy and self-determination; the wave of immigration to the US from all corners of the world; and the unique role America plays as the world's only global economic and military superpower. These conditions make it necessary for the United States to maintain a constant capacity in a broad range of languages, as there is no way of predicting exactly when world events will generate sudden demand for particular languages. While the concept of global coverage for the United States is hardly new, having emerged first as a result of WWII, the combination of globalization, democratization, immigration, and lone superpower status requires a degree of linguistic capacity and sophistication on our part which is unprecedented in our nation's history.

The language requirements arising from these circumstances are daunting. For example:

$ More than 65 federal agencies — from the State department to the CIA to the Department of Agriculture — have language requirements, a number that has doubled during the past fifteen years[2];

$ The White House's *National Security for a New Century* and the State Department's *United States Strategic Plan for International Affairs* both clearly lay

[1] "New Directions for the Next Century." Address delivered at the Title VI 40th Anniversary Conference: International Education in American Colleges and Universities: Prospect and Retrospect. Washington, DC, April 16, 1998.

[2] T Crump, T., Forthcoming. *Translation and Interpretation in the U.S. Government.* Washington: The National Foreign Language Center.

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out the global dimensions of national security to include all regions of the world, thereby resulting in global contingency needs for language.

$ Since 1991, more than 40,000 U.S. troops are or have been stationed in more than 110 nations (excluding NATO countries and Japan), including every nation in Latin America, all but two of the 15 successor states to the USSR, some 40 nations in Africa, and throughout South and Southeast Asia. More than 140 languages are spoken in these countries.[3]

$ In testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee in February 1998, Michael Murray, Vice President for Human Resources and Administration, Microsoft Corporation, stated that Microsoft generated 62% of its revenue in 1997 through export of its products to more than 100 countries. The ability to produce high-quality products that sell well in foreign markets, Mr. Murray testified, requires that U.S. companies have access to highly-skilled workers who understand the consumers, culture, and language of those markets.[4]

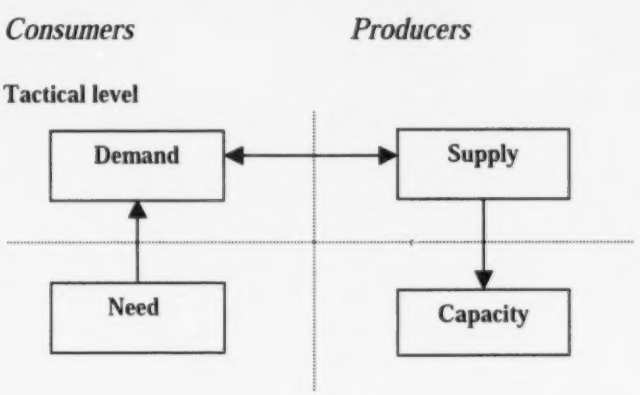
$ The U.S. accounts for almost one-sixth of worldwide service exports, and one-eighth of worldwide exports of merchandise.[5] In February 1999, the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education, the Global Alliance for Transitional Education, the National Foreign Language Center, and the Office of the US Trade Representative commissioned a survey of North American Accrediting, Certifying, and Licensing bodies, to ascertain the level of international activity among professions such as engineering, nursing, law, and medicine. Respondents indicated that lack of foreign language skills was an impediment to successful market penetration abroad.[6]

Clearly, language needs are real. Meeting (or failing to) requires resources and entails risk. What we do not know, however, is what the costs and benefits of language competence are, on the societal, corporate, or individual level.

Viewing Language as a Market Commodity

The Strategic Market Forces Framework for Language Policy and Planning treats language and intercultural competence as an economic commodity upon which act the forces of the free market.[7]

Strategic Market Forces Framework



- *Demand* is actual current requirements for expertise in language.
- *Supply* is the available expertise.
- *Capacity* represents the capability to supply language expertise to individuals or institutions for whatever task that may arise currently and into the foreseeable future.
- Supply and capacity are spread among five sectors: *Government, Academic, Private, Heritage* and *Overseas.*
- *Need* is the required number of experts, the specific skills and the determined levels of competency deriving

[3] NFLC Policy Issues, Vol.2, no. 2.

[4] Murray, M. Quote from: U.S. Congress. Hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "The High Tech Worker Shortage and Immigration Policy." (Date: 2/25/98). Text from: Federal News Service. Available from: Congressional Universe (Online Service). Bethesda, MD: Congressional Information Service.

[5] *Clearinghouse on State International Policies*, June/July 1999, p. 6.

[6] Miller, B. 1999. "1999 Globalization of the Professions Survey." ms. Washington: Global Alliance for Transnational Education

[7] Brecht, R., and A. Walton. 1994. "National Strategic Planning in the Less Commonly Taught Languages." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 532: 190-212, Brecht, R. and W. Rivers. 1999. *Language and National Security for the 21st Century: The Role of Title VI/Fulbright-Hays in Supporting National Language Capacity.* Dubuque: IA: Kendall-Hunt and the National Foreign Language Center.

from specific conditions impinging on the public good.

- Demand and need are further broken down into *Political and Military, Social, and Economic.*
- Supply and capacity are produced and maintained by *language providers.*
- Demand and need arise among *language consumers.*

Ideally (as indicated by the arrows in the diagram), *need* provokes *demand*, which in turn causes producers in the market to *supply* language and to maintain *capacity* for future production. From the cases mentioned above, it is evident that need, demand, and supply are all out of step, with real consequences for national language capacity.

The Questions to Ask:

If we accept that globalization, democratization, migration, and sole superpower status have real consequences for the use and production of language in the U.S., then the questions to be asked become much more focused:

- What are Demands and Needs for language in the US? Which languages? Which skills?
- Does demand reflect need? If not, why not?
- What is the nation's capacity in language? What are its strengths and weaknesses? (What contribution to meeting needs is made by the ethnic heritage communities?)
- What are the costs and benefits of a multilingual society and citizenry?
- What are the relative merits of different modes of supplying language to meet national needs? (For example, what are the costs and benefits of meeting US Government requirements for language (recruitment among the ethnic heritage communities; training in US Government language schools; reliance on the academic sector to produce language; contracting to the private sector; developing machine translation and voice recognition technology). Each has its proponents, none can answer this question.
- What are the costs and benefits of language in business? Does competence in language and cross-cultural communication contribute to profitability? How?
- How does knowledge of a language contribute to individual earnings?
- What is the value of the language industry? How much does it contribute to local, state, and national economy?
- What is the role of academe in meeting national needs, particularly in the private and federal sectors? What part of capacity does this sector represent?
- Who has access to gaining foreign language and intercultural skills in our nation's schools? Is access limited to students in certain disciplines and institutions?
- What is the relationship of exchange and study abroad to language capacity? (How does Continuing Education fit into the educational picture?)

How to Answer the Questions

In order to answer some of these questions, the NFLC conducts its Policy Initiative. Because we believe that informed policy decisions at all levels require valid data, we focus on basic research along the lines outlined above, and the dissemination of that research to policy makers. Crucial to the enterprise is input from policy makers: we need to know what questions must be answered, and if the questions we propose are indeed the right ones. Our approach is twofold: the regular publication of *NFLC Policy Issues*, and the conduct of monthly *Policy Forums*, where a group of policy makers and researchers from all sectors (particularly government, academe, and the private sector) gather to discuss major language policy issues facing the US. The next number of *NFLC Policy Issues* will feature Mr. Glenn Nordin, Director of Training Policy, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, C^3I, who will discuss DoD language challenges. Future issues will address heritage resources in the US, foreign language in the K-12 system, and the economic value of language to the nation, to businesses, and to the individual.

National Foreign Language Center
Policy Issues

William P. Rivers, Editor

The National Foreign Language Center is a non-profit research and policy institute committed to the improvement of US capacity in languages other than English. *NFLC Policy Issues* are intended to serve as a catalyst for debate by identifying issues of importance to our understanding of national language needs and national language capacity. *NFLC Policy Issues* are authored by NFLC staff as well as senior policy-makers, language consumers, and language providers from the Government, Academe, and the Private Sector, and are distributed to congressional, executive branch, industry, and educational policy-makers. The views expressed in *NFLC Policy Issues* are those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the NFLC or The Johns Hopkins University.

The National Foreign Language Center at The John Hopkins University
1619 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Fourth Floor, Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 202-667-8100 Fax: 202-667-6908
wrivers@nflc.org

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